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Religious Heresy and Radical Republicanism in John Milton's, *Paradise Lost*

LISA RIVA

Lisa wrote this piece under the mentorship of Dr. Greg Chaplin and presented it at The National Conference on Undergraduate Research in California in 2007.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* remains one of the most influential works of literature from the seventeenth century not only for its literary quality, but also for its controversial relationship to politics and theology. Throughout the epic, Milton subtly references distinctly Republican political concepts, continuing his fight against Royalist political views even after the Restoration. More controversial than his political viewpoints, however, is the heretical portrayal of biblical figures. By rejecting the Trinity and depicting God the Father and the Son of God as two separate beings, Milton adopts a theology many critics term Arianism. Although critics have previously recognized and dealt with Milton's Arianism as a theological issue, they have left its relationship to the author's radical political thought unexplored. *Paradise Lost* incorporates both Republican concepts, as established in his political tracts (such as the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*), and heretical Arian theology, as set out in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. Through his use of an Arian theology, Milton is able to depict the Son's necessary rise to glory through merit, a concept that naturally gives way to an argument against the birthright of monarchs. By framing the poem around an Arian portrayal of the relationship between God and the Son, Milton is able to best define his political values in his biblical epic, fusing together two otherwise separate spheres of radical thought.

Before actually beginning *Paradise Lost* in 1658, Milton published several political and religious tracts that, read today, reveal the author's evolving ideas about politics and Christianity. In 1649, Milton published what many consider to be his most sophisticated and radical political argument, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. This tract serves as a response to the political debates that circulated in England after the Civil War of the 1640s. According to Isabel Rivers, "The political conflict was chiefly over the question of sovereignty, ... The most widely held political theory was that of the balanced constitution, or mixed monarchy, in which sovereignty was shared between king and parliament..." (308). Although many supported the democratic nature of this balanced system, others had more extreme political standings. Many continued to support the idea that the birthright of a king enabled him to rule over his subjects as he saw fit; these people subscribed to the Royalist party. Others, according to Rivers, "began to abandon their appeal to tradition, and switch to revolutionary opinions: that parliament could make law by itself; that government was based on a contract between ruler and ruled, so that the king was answerable to his subjects; and that rights were more important than custom" (308). Milton, in his arguments against tyranny, found himself naturally aligned with these so-called Republicans.

In the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton constructs an argument against tyranny and the so-called birthright of kings by working against popular Royalist opinions. Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, one of the many Royalist political tracts of the time, claims that the relationship between a king and his subjects was like that of a father to his sons. According to Filmer, the right to rule is historically passed down from Adam's authority over his sons, and thus, "the succeeding patriarchs had, by right of fatherhood, royal authority over their children" (6). Filmer's argument is, essentially, that a king's subjects are like his sons and that they should respect him and his God-given authority. In Filmer's model, God rules over monarchs and divinely-appointed monarchs rule over men.

In the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton claims that Filmer's belief in the so-called birthright of kings leads to tyrannous rule and unfit monarchs. He writes: "that to say, as is usual, the king hath as good a right to his crown and dignity as any man to his inheritance, is to make the subject no better than the king's slave, his chattel, or his possession that may be bought and sold" (756). Here, Milton deconstructs Filmer's inheritance metaphor, claiming that such a system only makes one's subjects slaves and property. Milton's proposed solution to the tyranny of the birthright system is that all men, including monarchs, should be recognized as men under God. He writes: "No man who knows aught, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself" (754). Thus, instead of monarchs serving as intercessors between God and other men, the hierarchy is simplified: God rules over all men on Earth.

Just as his political tracts indicate radical Republican ideals, so do Milton's religious prose works break away from mainstream orthodox belief. Composed in the late 1650's, Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* is a lengthy theological treatise. In *De Doctrina*, Milton outlines his principle beliefs about the Christian faith and emphasizes his unorthodox understanding of the relationship between God and the Son. He rejects the Trinity and insists that God the Father and the Son of God are two distinctly separate beings, a position that critics such as John P. Rumrich and Michael Bauman term Arianism.

Surfacing in the fourth century, the heretical movement known as Arianism rejects the orthodox Christian notion the God and the Son are two persons of single divine being who share a mystical connection. Instead, Arians argue that God and the Son do not share the same essence, that they are separate beings with different powers and limitations. Milton supports this claim in *De Doctrina*, stating that: "If Father and Son were of one essence, which, because of their relationship, is impossible, it would follow that the Father was the Son's son and the Son the Father's father"

(264). According to Milton's logic, the Son is demoted to a level below the Father. The Son is therefore defined as a creature—much like man—who is not one with God, but instead shares in his glory.

Although classified as Arian, Milton does deviate slightly from the traditional Arian doctrine by claiming that the Father and the Son do share the same substance, that is, they are composed of the same material. Milton's understanding of substance, however, is more universal in that it is substance that connects all creatures to God. According to his stance in *De Doctrina*, God's substance is present in *all* created beings. Once again, this theology allows the Son to be defined as another of God's creatures—endowing him with qualities of a creature rather than the properties of God the Father. What makes the relationship between God and the Son closer than that of God and other creatures is their mutual will (fulfilled through the Son's actions). According to *De Doctrina*, the Father and the Son are one "not in essence but in love, in communion, in agreement, in charity, in spirit, and finally in glory" (220). It is the Son's merit, and therefore not his birthright, that accounts for what Milton refers to as the "extremely close" communion that the Son shares with God (220).

Critic John P. Rumrich identifies a potential reason why seventeenth century Republicans may have been interested in Arianism. He suggests: "Perhaps the impulse toward demystification expressed in Arianism was dimly perceived as a threat to the ideological basis of monarchical power" (87). This perceived connection between radical political and religious thought is at work in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In order to identify the ways in which Milton's Arianism and Republicanism work together in the poem, we must first recognize the ways in which the poem is, as Michael Bauman calls it, "an Arian document" (206).

During scenes in which God and the Son appear together, Milton consistently describes the two beings as physically separate. After being described as seated on two separate thrones in Book III, God demystifies his relationship with the Son when he announces that he is seeking someone to be offered as a human sacrifice to save mankind. He asks:

Say Heav'nly Powers, where shall we find such love,
Which of ye will be mortal to redeem
Man's mortal crime, and just th' unjust to save,
Dwells in Heaven charity so dear? (213-16)

Milton's God already knows that the Son will serve as the human sacrifice, but he poses the question aloud. In doing so, Milton implies that the Son is unaware of his eventual offering. If he were aware, it would not be the spontaneous heroic act the angels interpret it as. The dialogue that follows between the Son and God reemphasizes this disconnection; although these two beings are close, they only communicate verbally. If Milton were to suggest that God and the Son could communicate in nonverbal ways, readers would understand the two beings as having a more mystical connection. Instead, God is all-knowing, but the Son does not appear to be aware of his role until he responds to the Father. If the poet subscribed to the Trinitarian view, no dialogue about this pivotal event would be necessary because they would be two parts of the same being. Milton's Arianism requires that he separate the Father and the Son in order to portray the Son as a heroic agent separate from God.

Throughout *Paradise Lost*, the Son, God, and others comment on their understanding of the Son's role and his status as a created being. After the Son's offer to be the human sacrifice, the angels sing in celebration. Their hymn reemphasizes Milton's notion of the separation between God and the Son, but also addresses the concept of creation:

Thee next they sang of all Creation first,
 Begotten Son, Divine Similitude,
 In whose conspicuous count'nance, without cloud
 Made visible, th' Almighty Father shines,
 Whom else no creature can behold; on thee
 Impressed th' effulgence of his glory abides,
 Transfused on thee his ample Spirit rests.
 He Heav'n of Heav'ns and all the Powers therein
 By thee created, and by thee threw down
 Th' aspiring Dominations: (III.383-92)

Here, the concept of the Father's glory as being reflected in the Son draws a line between the two beings. The Son is not described as being *in* God or *a part* of him, but instead as a "shining" reflection of his glory. This passage emphasizes that God created the Son as a separate being, but also suggests that God created the Son in order to use him as a vehicle through which God may achieve his will. In offering himself as a sacrifice, the Son fulfills his duty as the mechanism through which God can perform action, and also defines himself as a noble creature by performing meritorious action.

It is clear that Milton attributes authority and praise to the Son because he embraces heroic martyrdom. The Son is valued not because of his natural connection to the Father, but instead because of his meritorious choices and actions. In staying true to

the notions of birthright versus merit described in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton constructs a hierarchy in *Paradise Lost* that reflects a society in which God is the one and only monarch. All other created beings, including the Son, are placed below God and have the ability to rise closer to or fall further away from God based on their use of free will.

The political undertone of the hierarchy constructed in *Paradise Lost* is emphasized through Milton's use of political terminology. The key words, merit and birthright, come up several times in descriptions of the relationship between God and created beings, suggesting that Milton intended to fuse together his religious and political ideas through his characters. In a particularly telling passage from Book III, God uses this political vocabulary to explain to the Son how and why he shall rise to power:

Because thou hast, though throned in highest bliss
 Equal to God, and equally enjoying
 God-like fruition, quitted all to save
 A world from utter loss, and hast been found
 By merit more than birthright Son of God,
 Found worthiest to be so by being good,
 Far more than great or high; because in thee
 Love hath abounded more than glory abounds,
 Therefore thy humiliation shall exalt
 With thee thy manhood also to this throne;
 Here shalt thou sit incarnate, here shalt reign
 Both God and man, Son both of God and man,
 Anointed universal King; (305-17)

Milton defines the Son as a mechanism through whom God acts. This idea, that God relies upon the Son's willingness to accomplish change, emphasizes the Arian distinction between the Father and the Son by commenting on the Son's subservience to the Father. This particular passage also makes a strong statement about the nature of ascent through merit as opposed to birthright. By stating that the Son will rise "By merit more than birthright," Milton uses the voice of God to make a rather political statement. Just as his Republican beliefs would have dictated that a monarch should gain power solely because of his execution of sound judgment and justice, so do the beliefs of Milton's God. The Son's "rise" to power, therefore, comes only as a consequence of his willingness to perform meritorious works. This passage continues to reinforce the themes of Arianism and Republicanism as God continues:

...all power
 I give thee, reign for ever, and assume
 Thy merits; under thee as Head Supreme
 Thrones, Princedom, Powers, Dominions I reduce:
 All knees to thee shall bow, (III. 317-21)

God once again stresses the fact that all power the Son receives is “given” to him by the Father, and that such gifts are based on the Son’s good actions. God continues, stating that all earthly governments will fall under the Son when he takes his throne, again reinforcing Milton’s concept of hierarchy. In this system, God remains at the top and the Son is below him. Milton again reminds his readers that God is the one true monarch to whom all men answer. He also indicates that the Son is a sort of secondary monarch because he has achieved a status closer to God than other created beings. Because of his merit, the Son has been granted the opportunity to rise. Once again, Milton uses this pivotal scene in Book III to juxtapose the Arian relationship between the Son and the Father with a politically sound system in which created beings rise to power based on their merit, not their innate closeness to the existing monarch.

Milton’s discussion of merit in *Paradise Lost* is not limited to the Son’s ability to rise. In Books XI and XII, the most politically charged sections of the poem, Michael explains to Adam that man has lost his authority over other men as a result of the fall. Michael tells Adam that although he would have held power over his future sons, Adam has lost his “pre-eminence” and will be “brought down / To dwell on even ground now with they sons” (347-48). As Michael and Adam watch from the highest point in Paradise, the future of mankind is played out before them. Milton’s version of history is decidedly Republican; it involves several failed governments under the tyrannies of unfit monarchs and records the degeneration of fraternal societies. Through Michael’s history lesson, Milton once again places the characters of the poem within an Arian hierarchy in which God is the one true monarch. Even the most political situations appear through a filter of Arian belief. In doing so, Milton necessarily employs the use of theology to define a political viewpoint. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is, then, a poem that does more than just embody both political and theological spheres, it is an epic designed to fuse together the author’s radical Republican principles and heretical Arian theology.

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